

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A method for providing consulting services to a customer, said method comprising the steps of:

assisting the customer online in formulating a problem to be addressed by the consulting services provider;

5 suggesting at least one approach for using consulting services to resolve the problem; and

providing the consulting services in a collaborative and centralized web-based environment.

10 2. A method in accordance with Claim 1 further comprising the step of formulating a request for specific types of consulting services to address the problem.

3. A method in accordance with Claim 2 further comprising the step of providing a plurality of customer options via a menu screen.

15 4. A method in accordance with Claim 2 wherein said step of providing a plurality of customer options comprises the step of providing at least two of a Consulting Request Wizard, a Sample Services option, a Sample Reports option, and a Project Collaboration option.

20 5. A method in accordance with Claim 4 wherein said step of assisting the customer online in formulating a problem to be addressed by the consulting services provider comprises the step of providing the Consulting Request Wizard, the Consulting Request Wizard configured to guide the customer interactively in defining the problem to be addressed.

6. A method in accordance with Claim 5 wherein said step of providing the Consulting Request Wizard comprises the step of providing the

Consulting Request Wizard with a plurality of prompts to the customer to provide information relating to the problem to be addressed.

5           7.       A method in accordance with Claim 6 wherein the step of providing the Consulting Request Wizard with a plurality of prompts to the customer to provide information relating to the problem to be addressed comprises the step of providing the Consulting Request Wizard with a prompt to the customer to provide information identifying a physical plant to which the problem relates.

10           8.       A method in accordance with Claim 7 wherein the step of providing the Consulting Request Wizard with a plurality of prompts to the customer to provide information relating to the problem to be addressed comprises the step of providing the Consulting Request Wizard with a prompt to the customer to provide information on the operating conditions of the physical plant.

15           9.       A method in accordance with Claim 6 wherein the step of providing the Consulting Request Wizard with a plurality of prompts to the customer to provide information relating to the problem to be addressed comprises the step of providing the Consulting Request Wizard with a prompt to the customer to provide information identifying a system to which the problem relates.

20           10.      A method in accordance with Claim 6 wherein the step of providing the Consulting Request Wizard with a plurality of prompts to the customer to provide information relating to the problem to be addressed comprises the step of providing the Consulting Request Wizard with a prompt to the customer to provide information identifying a component to which the problem relates.

25           11.      A method in accordance with Claim 6 wherein the step of providing the Consulting Request Wizard with a plurality of prompts to the customer to provide information relating to the problem to be addressed comprises the step of providing the Consulting Request Wizard with a prompt to the customer to provide information identifying other consulting work that is potentially useful for solving the problem.

12. A method in accordance with Claim 6 wherein the step of providing the Consulting Request Wizard with a plurality of prompts to the customer to provide information relating to the problem to be addressed comprises the step of providing the Consulting Request Wizard with a prompt to the customer to provide information identifying a type of consultation support that is potentially useful for solving the problem.

13. A method in accordance with Claim 6 wherein the step of providing the Consulting Request Wizard with a plurality of prompts to the customer to provide information relating to the problem to be addressed comprises the step of providing the Consulting Request Wizard with a prompt to the customer to provide information identifying at least one area of technical expertise that is potentially useful for solving the problem.

14. A method in accordance with Claim 6 wherein the step of providing the Consulting Request Wizard with a plurality of prompts to the customer to provide information relating to the problem to be addressed comprises the step of providing the Consulting Request Wizard with a prompt to the customer to provide information on the time available to solve the problem.

15. A method in accordance with Claim 4 wherein said step of providing at least two of a Consulting Request Wizard, a Sample Services option, a Sample Reports option, and a Project Collaboration option comprises providing the Sample Services option, the Sample Services option configured to provide the customer with descriptions of a plurality of sample services available to the customer.

16. A method in accordance with Claim 15 wherein said step of providing the Sample Services option comprises the step of providing the customer with descriptions of standard services including at least one of flaw evaluation, systems evaluation, thermal hydraulic evaluation, expert consultation, and lost parts analysis.

17. A method in accordance with Claim 16 wherein said step of providing the Sample Services option comprises the step of providing the customer with a description of each standard service, the description for each standard service comprising at least two of benefits of the service, scope of the service, deliverables of the service, schedule of the service, and customer input information required for the service.

18. A method in accordance with Claim 4 wherein said step of providing at least two of a Consulting Request Wizard, a Sample Services option, a Sample Reports option, and a Project Collaboration option comprises providing the Sample Services option and the Sample Reports option, the Sample Reports option configured to provide the customer with links to sample reports that are related to a standard service selected by the customer.

19. A method in accordance with Claim 4 wherein said step of providing at least two of a Consulting Request Wizard, a Sample Services option, a Sample Reports option, and a Project Collaboration option comprises providing the Project Collaboration option, the Project Collaboration option configured to provide the customer and the consulting services provider with a centralized collaboration area wherein single versions of consulting communications are posted and revised.

20. A consulting method comprising the steps of:

with an electronic user interface, assisting a customer in formulating a problem to be addressed by a consulting services provider;

suggesting through the electronic user interface at least one approach for using consulting services to resolve the problem; and

providing the user interface in a centralized web-based environment.

21. A consulting method in accordance with Claim 20 further comprising the step of providing the electronic user interface, the electronic user

interface configured to assist the customer in formulating the problem to be addressed by the consulting services provider.

22. A consulting method in accordance with Claim 21 wherein the step of providing the electronic user interface comprises the step of providing a web site accessible by the customer via a computer device interconnected to a distributed computer network.

23. A consulting method in accordance with Claim 21 wherein the step of assisting the customer, with an electronic user interface, in formulating a problem to be addressed by the consulting services provider comprises the step of guiding the customer interactively in defining the problem to be addressed.

24. A consulting method in accordance with Claim 23 wherein the step of guiding the customer interactively in defining the problem to be addressed comprises the step of prompting the customer to provide information relating to the problem to be addressed.

25. A consulting method in accordance with Claim 24 wherein the step of prompting the customer to provide information relating to the problem to be addressed comprises the step of prompting the customer to provide at least one of an identity of a plant system to which the problem relates, the identity of a system component to which the problem relates, current operating conditions of the plant system to which the problem relates, a description of pre-existing consulting services to which the problem relates, a type of consultation support that is potentially useful for solving the problem, an area of technical expertise that is potentially useful to solve the problem, and an amount of time available to solve the problem.

26. A consulting method in accordance with Claim 25 wherein the step of suggesting through the electronic user interface at least one approach for using the consulting services to resolve the problem comprises the step of providing the customer with a description of standard actions taken by the consulting services

provider in response to problems of the type described by the information provided by the customer.

27. A consulting method in accordance with Claim 26 wherein the step of providing the customer with a description of standard actions taken by the consulting services provider in response to problems of the type described by the information provided by the customer comprises the step of describing at least one of a one of a plurality of standard actions, the standard actions comprising flaw evaluation, systems evaluation, expert consultation and lost parts analysis.

28. A consulting method in accordance with Claim 26 wherein the step of providing the customer with a description of standard actions taken by the consulting services provider in response to problems of the type described by the information provided by the customer comprises the step of describing a standard report for each type of standard action.

29. A consulting method in accordance with Claim 28 wherein the step of describing a standard report comprises the step of providing the customer with access to at least one related sample report.

30. A consulting method in accordance with Claim 29 wherein the step of providing the customer with access to at least one related sample report comprises the step of providing the customer with access to a plurality of sample reports that are related to the problem being addressed.

31. A consulting method in accordance with Claim 29 further comprising the step of prompting the customer to specify a request for at least one of the available standard actions to solve the problem being addressed.

32. A consulting method in accordance with Claim 31 further comprising the step of generating a consulting services request based on the information provided by the customer and the standard actions specified by the customer.

33. A consulting services method in accordance with Claim 32 further comprising the step of transmitting the consulting services request to the consulting service provider.

34. A consulting method in accordance with Claim 33 further comprising the step of providing a response to the consulting services request.

35. A consulting method in accordance with Claim 34 wherein the step of providing a response to the consulting services request comprises the steps of:

contacting the customer with a consultant from the consulting services provider; and

initiating consulting services for the customer.

36. An electronic system for providing consulting services to a customer, said system comprising:

a server configured to receive a consulting services request from a customer;

a user interface stored on said server, said user interface configured to assist the customer online in formulating a problem to be addressed by the consulting services provider; and

a plurality of devices coupled through a computer network to said server, said plurality of devices configured to provide the user with access to said user interface.

37. An electronic system in accordance with Claim 36, said user interface further configured to provide the customer with at least one approach for using consulting services to resolve the problem. .

38. An electronic system in accordance with Claim 36 wherein said user interface comprises a centralized web-based application configured to provide the consulting services including collaboration with the customer.

39. An electronic system in accordance with Claim 36 wherein said user interface is configured to assist the customer in formulating a request for specific types of consulting services to address the problem.

40. A method in accordance with Claim 36 wherein said user interface comprises a plurality of customer options presented via a menu screen.

41. An electronic system in accordance with Claim 40 wherein said plurality of customer options comprises at least two of a Consulting Request Wizard, a Sample Services option, a Sample Reports option, and a Project Collaboration option.

42. An electronic system in accordance with Claim 41 wherein said plurality of customer options comprises the Consulting Request Wizard, the Consulting Request Wizard configured to guide the customer interactively in defining the problem to be addressed.

43. An electronic system in accordance with Claim 42 wherein said Consulting Request Wizard comprises a plurality of prompts to the customer to provide information relating to the problem to be addressed.

44. An electronic system in accordance with Claim 43 wherein the plurality of prompts to the customer to provide information relating to the problem to be addressed comprises a prompt to the customer to provide information identifying a physical plant to which the problem relates.

45. An electronic system in accordance with Claim 43 wherein the plurality of prompts to the customer to provide information relating to the problem to be addressed comprises a prompt to the customer to provide information on the operating conditions of the physical plant.

46. An electronic system in accordance with Claim 43 wherein the plurality of prompts to the customer to provide information relating to the problem to

be addressed comprises a prompt to the customer to provide information identifying a system to which the problem relates.

47. An electronic system in accordance with Claim 43 wherein the plurality of prompts to the customer to provide information relating to the problem to be addressed comprises a prompt to the customer to provide information identifying a component to which the problem relates.

48. An electronic system in accordance with Claim 43 wherein the plurality of prompts to the customer to provide information relating to the problem to be addressed comprises a prompt to the customer to provide information identifying other consulting work that is potentially useful for solving the problem.

49. An electronic system in accordance with Claim 43 wherein the plurality of prompts to the customer to provide information relating to the problem to be addressed comprises a prompt to the customer to provide information identifying at least one area of technical expertise that is potentially useful for solving the problem.

50. An electronic system in accordance with Claim 43 wherein the plurality of prompts to the customer to provide information relating to the problem to be addressed comprises a prompt to the customer to provide information on the time available to solve the problem.

51. An electronic system in accordance with Claim 41 wherein said plurality of customer options comprises the Sample Services option, the Sample Services option configured to provide the customer with descriptions of a plurality of sample services available to the customer.

52. An electronic system in accordance with Claim 51 wherein the Sample Services option comprises descriptions of standard services including at least one of flaw evaluation, systems evaluation, thermal hydraulic evaluation, expert consultation, and lost parts analysis.

53. An electronic system in accordance with Claim 52 wherein a description of each standard service comprises at least two of benefits of the service, scope of the service, deliverables of the service, schedule of the service, and customer input information required for the service.

5 54. An electronic system in accordance with Claim 41 wherein said plurality of customer options comprises the Sample Services option and the Sample Reports option, the Sample Reports option configured to provide the customer with links to sample reports that are related to a standard service selected by the customer.

10 55. An electronic system in accordance with Claim 41 wherein said plurality of customer options comprises the Project Collaboration option, the Project Collaboration option configured to provide the customer and the consulting services provider with a centralized collaboration area wherein single versions of consulting communications are posted and revised.